

**Mayoral Statement for South Dunedin Action Group  
public meeting  
Monday, 20 June 2016**

Mayor of Dunedin Dave Cull sends his apologies for this evening's meeting.

He is currently overseas on Council business and regrets that he can't take the opportunity to be here. However, he has provided me with the following statement to be read out tonight.

**Mayoral Statement**

Good evening.

Firstly, can I acknowledge that the last 12 months have been an extremely difficult time for many members of the South Dunedin community.

The June 2015 floods caused much damage, disruption and upheaval for local residents and businesses. But the community response to the floods also demonstrated the values that make Dunedin such a great city to live in.

Many people volunteered to help each other out. Donations and offers of support for those in need were abundant.

Naturally, people in the community are still very concerned about the risks facing the area.

While I can't give guarantees about what will and won't happen in the future, I can assure you that Council and I are taking the risks very seriously and that the wellbeing of South Dunedin residents and businesses is our absolute top priority.

In extending the invitation to be here this evening, the South Dunedin Action Group asked Council and I to address a number of questions.

Those that concern facts and figures pertaining to, for instance South Dunedin's stormwater drainage network, are best answered by Council staff who have the expertise and responsibility for that.

Where appropriate I will of course reference those facts we do know, but my comments will focus on Council policy and intentions – the strategic concerns that are the responsibility of the elected arm of Council.

First, the context for South Dunedin. It is one of the most important parts of Dunedin.

Historically because it is among the oldest parts of town; geographically because it is central, flat and convenient; and demographically because it is very densely settled. In fact some of the smaller house sites were first marked out as tent sites during the gold rush.

The age of South Dunedin certainly contributes to some of the challenges that face the area and its residents. Some of the infrastructure is older than later developed parts of town.

I have expressed concerns in the past about the age and quality of older housing in some of the area.

However, the major challenges that we are concerned about here are brought about by South Dunedin's location, topography and height above sea level. It is close to the coast, a very flat area surrounded by hills that drain onto it, and much of it is barely higher than sea level.

Last year's flooding affected several parts of the city, but South Dunedin severely. Many residents suffered major loss and upheaval.

Since then, the Council has made a massive effort to understand the causes of the flooding and look at what can be done to reduce the impact of similar occurrences in the future.

Simply put, the basic cause of the flooding was that more rain fell in that event last June than the stormwater system could possibly cope with.

I am aware that some commentators claim that is not true – that the stormwater drainage system has enough capacity to cope with that much water. Well that is not the case and it is actually a simple matter of maths. The system has a finite, known capacity. When that is exceeded it will overflow and it did last June.

However, Council also acknowledges that some of our infrastructure wasn't working as well as it should have and that contributed to the severity of the flooding and certainly to how long it took to drain.

Specifically, the Portobello Pumping Station screens blocked which meant the pumps worked below capacity. This made the flooding worse. In addition, and to a lesser extent, mud tanks were blocked.

But with that much rain there was always going to be significant flooding even if the drainage system had worked perfectly.

Council is spending some \$650,000 addressing those two issues. All of South Dunedin's mud tanks have now been thoroughly cleaned and a new screen and additional alarms are being installed at the Pumping Station.

This will mean the existing South Dunedin stormwater system will work as well as it possibly can. But Council is also looking at all other ways we might be able to improve the current stormwater drainage system.

This is necessary because scientists predict that Dunedin will continue to experience more extreme and frequent rain events as a result of a changing climate.

Indeed we had been warned that such extreme rain events were going to become more frequent. In 2010, Council received a report on the potential effects of climate change by Emeritus Professor Blair Fitzharris that said just that.

No one can say that the specific event last June was caused simply by climate change. But we can say that such events had been predicted to occur more often.

The current stormwater system can't simply be upgraded overnight. Any significant upgrades will potentially cost tens of millions of dollars.

If the system was being built new now, and knowing what we do now, we MIGHT build in more capacity. Council's qualified engineering staff are in a better position than I am to comment on that. Suffice to say that it is certainly not as simple as replacing old pipes with bigger ones.

Anyway, the need for that extra capacity was not known when the system was installed and just as you don't upgrading every older house in town whenever the building code is amended, you don't rip up perfectly good pipes before they have reached the end of their economic life without carefully considering the unintended consequences.

However, there are two assurances Council can give South Dunedin with regard to the stormwater network.

Firstly, by the end of August when the new screen is installed at the Portobello Rd pumping station, the system will be working as well as it possibly can.

Secondly, we are looking at every other possible way we can enhance the performance of the system to mitigate such flooding in the future.

I consider this work to be of the utmost importance as every gain we can make in enhancing the performance of the stormwater system, further reduces the risks to residents and businesses in South Dunedin when there are further extreme rain events.

Some members of the South Dunedin Action Group who have professional experience in this area have helped Council staff by contributing ideas, and thanks to them for that.

As well as more extreme rain events, there is a second distinctive threat facing South Dunedin, and other low lying parts of coastal Dunedin.

That second threat is inundation from rising groundwater – the water found underground in the cracks and spaces in soil, sand and rock.

Scientists predict that, over time, rising sea levels will force up groundwater in low-lying areas such as South Dunedin, exacerbating existing problems such as rainwater not being able to soak into the ground. This will put even more pressure on the stormwater system, and surface ponding in some areas, even without rainfall.

Last year a major report from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment warned that South Dunedin was at particular risk from groundwater inundation caused by rising sea levels.

There are no quick and easy answers to deal with this issue. As a Council, and as a community, we don't yet have all the facts around the sea and ground processes that are unfolding and the timeframes around them.

I have been specifically asked whether a "strategic withdrawal" for parts, or all, of South Dunedin is part of Council's considerations on the future of the area? And if so to what extent?

Because we don't yet have all the facts, neither I, nor the DCC, currently have a preferred option or policy for the long-term risks facing South Dunedin from inundation from groundwater. We don't even know what all the options might be yet.

But clearly, and the Parliamentary Commissioner signalled this, in Dunedin as in many other parts of the world, non-protection will be investigated as one option alongside protection measures.

A further and more important reason Council hasn't yet formed a view on responses to groundwater issues is that the South Dunedin community, indeed the whole Dunedin community, will need to be involved in reaching conclusions and establishing priorities once we have all the facts and more accurate projections.

We are working with the Otago Regional Council to understand what is happening with groundwater. Various studies are measuring the influence of tides, sea level and rainfall on the level of groundwater, and where that influence is felt worst. We don't have all the facts yet, but hope to have a clearer picture in a few months.

Once we have a clear idea of the sea and ground processes that are unfolding, timeframes around them and the options that might be available to deal with the results of those, we will then need a major discussion with you, the South Dunedin community, about those options and about what levels of protection and infrastructure service are possible, what the community wants, and what the community can afford.

The community will be informed, engaged and involved in exploring all of these possible options and developing a long-term strategy. This will be a careful and considered process – it is more important to do it well, than to rush and get it wrong. I consider the issue of groundwater inundation more serious and challenging in the long term than flooding from extreme rain events. So Council is and will be investing considerable resource to understand and develop responses to it.

But in the face of changes to sea and groundwater levels, no-one can give assurances or guarantees that it will remain exactly the same in South Dunedin, and other low-lying parts of Dunedin, New Zealand and the world, in the future. Indeed it would be irresponsible for me or anyone else to make promises and give assurances that can't be fulfilled.

What I can assure you all is that the wellbeing of South Dunedin residents and businesses is absolutely top priority.

I was also asked to give my view of what South Dunedin would look like in 20 years.

Obviously I can't know exactly but I can offer a vision that I believe would be worth pursuing.

I envisage a community where the issues of flooding and sea incursion have been dealt with in ways that make the most of the opportunities that beach frontage offers.

The dunes and beach have been stabilised.

Conscious urban renewal and better designed quality housing has replaced old unhealthy houses built too close to the ground.

Public transport and cycleways offer better alternative transportation options than are currently available.

The old Gasworks complex and a new community centre provide genuine community hubs for the area as well as social services focussed on, but not restricted to, youth employment, elder support and digital access.

I envisage a diverse, supportive and well supported community where increased job opportunities flowing from our city's economic development efforts have lifted the average income significantly.

I have also been asked to comment on what plans Council has for South Dunedin. The following planned Council investments will contribute to achievement of that vision.

### **South Dunedin community hub**

Potential sites for a proposed new South Dunedin community hub have been reviewed and from this a short list of five sites has been developed.

The financial business case will be delivered to the project team by the end of July 2016.

Following adoption of this case, the five sites will be tested to ensure the needs of the community are met. We will be consulting with the community later this year to see what their priorities are and what they want to see included in a community hub.

We envisage that the community will grow the hub over time based on its own needs and aspirations – Council will be there to support and invest in this process.

### **Gas works site enlargement**

Council staff are also investigating the purchase of three sites in South Dunedin to allow for the future expansion of the Dunedin Gasworks Museum.

The Dunedin Gasworks Museum is one of only a handful of known preserved gasworks museums in the world. The purchase of the neighbouring sites would allow for future expansion of the museum and this would be a very positive step for South Dunedin. It would also contribute towards a wider community hub concept for South Dunedin.

### **Kings High School Hockey turf investment**

Council recently agreed to (conditionally) contribute \$500,000 to proposed new \$1.7 million hockey turf at King's High School.



## **Cosy homes (Not a Council controlled trust but partially funded by DCC)**

The Cosy Homes Trust, established at the start of 2015 and of which I am the Chair, is at the heart of driving work towards the city's ambition that everyone in Dunedin lives in a warm and cosy home by 2025.

Dunedin is estimated to have over 18,000 homes that are not warm or dry enough to keep people healthy and comfortable at a reasonable cost. Many are in South Dunedin.

Better housing means healthier people.

And better housing is also a 'must' for economic development in the city.

Improving housing is a key priority for South Dunedin and has been for a number of years.

## **Ocean Beach work**

The St Clair beachfront and the promenade have long been a focal point for recreational and social activities for Dunedin people and visitors alike.

Equally important is the seawall's critical role as a part of the city's southern coastal defence, along with the sand dunes at Ocean Beach.

Work to install sand sausages along about 200m of Ocean Beach is underway and is progressing well.

This work is to protect the dunes from heavy seas after the existing ageing sand sausages were damaged during last year's winter storms.

It will provide protection to the dunes as well as the Victoria Road properties which back on to this area.

In the longer term, we are investigating the medium term protection options for Ocean Beach, including developing a plan to address the coastal erosion affecting Ocean Beach, including the St Clair seawall.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion - South Dunedin faces significant challenges. I consider those are some of the most serious issues facing the Dunedin community and Dunedin City Council over the medium term.

So this Council and future councils have committed and will commit significant resources and engage in significant consultation with the South Dunedin community as we come to understand what is happening, what timeframes it is happening in and what the options and possible responses might be.

Doing nothing and hoping will not be an option. We will have to take proactive steps but also treat the challenges as opportunities to improve and enhance South Dunedin for the benefit of all its residents and businesses.